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ARAB & ARAB AMERICAN *Feminisms*

GENDER, VIOLENCE,
& BELONGING

*Edited by Rabab Abdulhadi,
Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber*



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Arab American Feminisms

Mobilizing the Politics of Invisibility

AMIRA JARMAKANI

If you want to hear me, you'll listen to my silences as well as my words.

—Joanna Kadi, "Speaking (about) Silence"

This chapter explores Arab American feminisms as mediated by the paradoxical framework of being simultaneously invisible and hypervisible. Calling this idea the "politics of invisibility" (since hypervisibility also functions to obscure the creative work of Arab American feminists), Amira Jarmakani looks at the ways Arab American feminists have worked in coalition with U.S.-based feminists of color, deploying what Chela Sandoval has called "oppositional consciousness." Ultimately, she argues that one way of responding to the complexities of the U.S. context is to strategically mobilize the politics of invisibility, transforming it from a weakness into a useful and powerful tactic.

A few years ago, I walked into a coffeehouse in Atlanta, ordered a drink, and placed the book I was reading, *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, on the counter while I paid for my drink.¹ "Arab feminism," the barista exclaimed. "That's just an oxymoron to me!" Her comment, cloaked as it was in certainty and self-assurance, demonstrates a particularly precarious positioning into which Arab and Arab American feminisms are often thrust. Given the prevalence of popular misinformation about Arab and Muslim womanhood in the United States, Arab American feminists face a complicated context that simultaneously seeks to define our realities as well as obscure the issues we consider to be pressing. The barista's comment, disarming in its nonchalance, glosses over the nefarious meaning in both the content and the tone of her statement, which quietly insinuates a rich field of feminist thought out of existence. Furthermore, far from unique, the idea that Arab (or Arab American)

feminism is oxymoronic gains credibility against the backdrop of U.S. official discourse about the “war on terror,” which appropriates feminist logic in order to justify militarism and neoliberal imperialism. The barista’s comment, uttered in September 2002, is indicative of the intensification of Orientalism and Islamophobia following the events of September 11, 2001; her presumed knowledge that Arab feminism could not exist was framed and bolstered by the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, cast by the Bush administration as a project of liberation meant to save Afghan women from the oppression of the Taliban.² Indeed, this one anecdotal interaction exemplifies multiple layers through which Arab American feminism tends to be perceived. At the most obvious surface level is the narrative of the imperialist-colonialist civilizing mission, which capitalizes on the image of exotic, oppressed women who must be saved from their indigenous (hyper)patriarchy. Adopting the “women’s rights” civilizing mission stance, in turn, depends on an appropriation of feminist logic, yet it must be a logic that is amenable to the imperialist position. In the case of the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, for example, the U.S.-based Feminist Majority Foundation had been advocating on behalf of (but not with) Afghan women since at least the early 1990s. In what could be called a form of “global feminism,” the Feminist Majority worked from the position of savior rather than one of solidarity with feminists in Afghanistan, and therefore developed a position easily appropriated in the service of militarism. Importantly, the military-imperialist and feminist-imperialist stances collude to reify stereotypical notions of Arab and Muslim womanhood as monolithically oppressed. They depend on a set of U.S. cultural mythologies about the Arab and Muslim worlds, which are often promulgated through overdetermined signifiers, like the “veil” (the English term collapsing a range of cultural and religious dress expressing modesty, piety, or identity, or all three). These powerful symbols, in turn, threaten to eclipse the creative work of Arab American feminists. Because the mythologies are so pervasive, operating subtly and insidiously on the register of “common sense,” Arab American feminists are often kept oriented toward correcting these common misconceptions rather than focusing on our own agendas and concerns.

Perhaps owing to its actual dynamism and flexibility across multiple historical and cultural contexts (and known by various names and practices), the cultural mythology of the veil serves as a salient example of the paradoxical framework Arab American feminists must negotiate. The image of the veil has been appropriated and deployed, as I have been arguing, by colonialist and imperialist powers to justify domination (for example, Britain in Egypt,³ France in Algeria,⁴ and

the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq). It has also been utilized as a symbol of cultural authenticity in anticolonial nationalist movements and as a loaded marker in debates about “civilization,” modernity, and liberal-democratic citizenship,⁵ all of which tend to obscure discussion of the ways Muslim women negotiate faith and piety.⁶ With the exception of the last, most deployments of the veil eclipse the complex sociohistorical realities of the women they purport to represent. Functioning according to what Minoou Moallem has called a “semiotic war,” the cultural mythology of the veil easily becomes a signifying tool among competing patriarchies or imperialisms or both, a framing that constructs Arab and Muslim women as either hidden or revealed objects rather than thinking subjects.⁷ The paradox is that, as a marker (supposedly) of invisibility and cultural authenticity, it renders Arab and Muslim womanhood as simultaneously invisible and hypervisible. As I have been noting, Arab and Muslim female subjectivity is obscured by the mythology of the veil, while the notions of oppression, tradition, and civilization become animated in the service of imperialist or nationalist agendas that render the mythology, if not the women, hypervisible. As feminists of color analyzing the impact of the faulty levees after Hurricane Katrina have pointed out, both invisibility and hypervisibility can operate as tools of oppression.⁸ As demonstrated by my opening anecdote, the cultural mythology of the veil has largely signified invisibility in the U.S. context in order to corroborate dominant assumptions about the oppression of Arab and Muslim women. The powerful presence of these women is therefore subsumed under the louder message of their supposedly helpless silence. As hypervisible, the mythology of the veil is so powerful and prolific in the United States that it is virtually impossible to talk about the realities of Arab and Arab American women’s lives without invoking, and necessarily responding to, the looming image and story that the mythology of the veil tells.

Although I have been focusing on the U.S. cultural construction of the “veil” so far, it is by no means the only signifier, or sensationalist issue, that impacts the work of Arab American feminists. Indeed, the point is not that Arab American feminists are unconcerned with the questions raised by the cultural and religious customs women negotiate in various contexts and the way these customs—and women’s subjectivity—are circumscribed within patriarchal, nationalist, imperialist, and local realities. Rather, the problem is that a range of complex, nuanced concerns are flattened into convenient symbols, which then become fodder for mainstream debates about the “death” of (U.S.) feminism.⁹ Take, for example, the opening sentence of a 2007 article by Christina Hoff Sommers:

The subjection of women in Muslim societies—especially in Arab nations and in Iran—is today very much in the public eye. Accounts of lashings, stonings, and honor killings are regularly in the news, and searing memoirs by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Azar Nafisi have become major best-sellers. One might expect that by now American feminist groups would be organizing protests against such glaring injustices, joining forces with the valiant Muslim women who are working to change their societies. This is not happening.¹⁰

Sommers's opening statement demonstrates a number of things. First, it reiterates the laundry list of issues—"honor killings" and "stonings," for example—that have become the primary lenses through which Arab, Iranian, and Muslim women's realities are filtered in popular U.S. discourse. Second, it invokes native informants—figures like Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Azar Nafisi—who are indeed widely popular in the United States, no doubt because they corroborate the images their audiences already hold about the status of women in Arab and Muslim societies.¹¹ Finally, and perhaps most revealingly, its true focus is a critique of "American feminist groups," who are (according to Sommers's logic) supporting (Islamic) "terrorism" by failing to denounce the absolute subjugation of women in the Arab and Muslim worlds. The problem, again, is in the framing of the issue. It capitalizes on the idea of Arab and Muslim women's oppression, signified through overdetermined symbols (like the "veil") and sensationalized, decontextualized news stories (about "stonings" and "lashings"), in the service of another project altogether: building a case for the "war on terror" by characterizing the Arab and Muslim worlds as widely supporting terrorism and oppression. Notably (and significantly), any critical space for Arab American feminists is either obviated or filled by native informants who speak to the monolithic logic of absolute oppression through ready-made symbols and news stories.

Building on this idea of the way Arab American feminisms have been circumscribed within a paradoxical framework, I would also like to suggest that such a position might be put to strategic use. In her essay "Speaking (about) Silence," Joanna (now Joe) Kadi argues that stories of silence (or being silenced) are political, a point that has much salience for the case of Arab American feminisms. While she largely frames silence as a form of oppression that can be alleviated through coming into one's voice, I want to build on her argument here to suggest that silence can also be a potential strategy (among many others) in crafting an oppositional consciousness through which to both define Arab American feminisms and build alliances and solidarities with other women of color feminists in the United States.

A Historical Context for Arab American Feminisms

The anecdote with which I began also demonstrates a general context of misunderstanding about and misrepresentation of Arab womanhood and Arab feminisms, which help to determine the framework for the articulation and reception of Arab American feminisms. Because Arab American feminism often finds itself necessarily engaged with an incomplete and monolithic understanding of Arab womanhood, it equally often speaks from a corrective, and therefore defensive, stance.

This type of oppositional stance is nothing new. In fact, it closely resembles Leila Ahmed's experience at the 1980 National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) conference as she recounts it in her article "Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem." Ahmed's article, though certainly not the only or the oldest example of Arab American feminism, provides a point of reference for tracing the trajectory of Arab American feminism in the United States. Since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, Arab American feminism has been portrayed and perceived, from a mainstream perspective, as suddenly relevant or newly forming. Yet, using the 1980 and 2001 NWSA conferences as a loose framework, I am interested in exploring the way in which Arab American feminists have been participating in critical feminist dialogue for the past few decades. Charting its intersections with women of color feminisms in the United States, I will be particularly exploring the development of oppositional consciousness as a defining, integral feature of Arab American feminisms. A preliminary example comes from Leila Ahmed's experience at the 1980 NWSA conference. While attending a panel entitled "Women in Islam," Ahmed was surprised to hear what she found to be an overly optimistic view of women's status in Islam. Although Ahmed agreed that "Islam had, as that panel maintained, brought about a number of positive gains for women in Arabia at the time, and had granted women certain rights," she felt that fact "still did not warrant playing down Islam's blatant endorsement of male superiority and male control of women, or glossing over the harshness of, in particular, its marriage, divorce, and child custody laws." Having attended a conference devoted to critical interrogation of the status of women across multiple contexts, Ahmed was no doubt confused to find the panelists' analysis of gender oppression within Islam strikingly underdeveloped. Nevertheless, as she explains in her later reflection, she had not yet lived in the United States and, therefore, did not yet understand the defensive position from which the panelists had begun. Before discussing the rich complexity and dynamics of female oppression within the Islamic tradition, the "Women in Islam" panelists first had to address those certainties and assumptions that existed

in the audience about the hyperpatriarchal and overly oppressive nature of Islam. There was no space for the panelists to offer an honest and productive critique of the status of women in Islam without first confronting U.S. misperceptions about Islam. As Ahmed discovered, these misperceptions were (and are) deeply entrenched in the mainstream psyche: "Just as Americans 'know' that Arabs are backward, they know also with the same flawless certainty that Muslim women are terribly oppressed and degraded. And they know this not because they know that women everywhere in the world are oppressed, but because they believe that, specifically, Islam monstrously oppresses women."¹²

This type of "knowledge" about Islam, which is often conflated with an understanding of the Middle East as the two have become virtually interchangeable in U.S. discourse, is the same sort of certainty that has reified the cultural mythology of the veil as an all-encompassing signifier of Arab and Muslim womanhood in the United States. As Ahmed points out, there is not simply a dearth of information about Arab and Muslim women; rather, there is a plethora of misinformation about the nature of female oppression in Islam. Consequently, Arab American feminists often find themselves absorbed in the task of addressing and correcting this misinformation, which ultimately subverts and redirects Arab American feminist energy and analysis.

A contemporary example of such a double bind can be found in the public discourse surrounding "Islamofascism Awareness Week," which was staged by the "Terrorism Awareness Project" (an affiliate of the David Horowitz Freedom Center). As described by Horowitz in the magazine *Front Page*, the goal of the October 2007 event was to "confront two big lies of the political left: that George Bush created the 'war on terror' and that global warming is a greater danger to Americans than global Jihad and Islamic supremacism."¹³ Although "Islamofascism Awareness Week" mostly drew criticism for its sloppy conflation of "terrorism" and "fascism" with Islam, in part through its rhetorical use of dubious terms such as "global jihad" and "Islamic supremacism," it is perhaps most notable for its tactical deployment of gender oppression and its strategic targeting of women's studies departments across the United States. Despite purporting to care about women's oppression, the argument goes, women's studies departments in the United States have been inexcusably silent about "Islamic misogyny," the brutal oppression of women in the Muslim world, and "Islamic gynophobia."¹⁴ If equating "the Left" with so-called Islamofascists (or, in another formulation, "feminists and Islamists") has been a clever, yet disingenuous, strategy of the David Horowitz Freedom Center to discredit widespread critique of the "war on terror" and to demonize Islam by attributing all intimate violence against

Muslim women to the religion itself, its appropriation of Muslim womanhood in the service of its own argument is a well-worn Orientalist and imperialist trope.¹⁵ Most important, though, it sets up a familiar dichotomy of actors (the freedom-loving U.S. liberators on one side, with "feminists and Islamists" on the other, for example) warring over the presumptive task of saving Muslim women. Though I am loathe to give the Freedom Center more credit than it is due, the fact is that it is part of a larger discourse (including voices as diverse as the Freedom Center, the Bush administration, the National Organization for Women, and mainstream newspapers) that speaks about Muslim women, invoking them symbolically as part of a rhetorical strategy. Indeed, this rhetorical strategy is often so effective as to reify the false binaries of liberation and oppression forever hovering around Arab and Muslim women.

Despite her seeming attempt to undercut the types of claims made by David Horowitz and Christina Hoff Sommers, for example, Katha Pollitt (in her "Open Letter from American Feminists") reinforces the same binary that situates Arab and Muslim women as objects of sensationalist (cultural-religious) violence, such as "female genital mutilation (FGM), 'honor' murder, forced marriage, child marriage, compulsory Islamic dress codes, the criminalization of sex outside marriage, [and] brutal punishments like lashing and stoning."¹⁶ In her rush to defend U.S. feminist organizations against the accusation that they do not support gender-justice struggles for Muslim women, she uses the same sensationalist examples that have inscribed Muslim women as victims of their culture or religion, thereby perpetuating a rhetorical framework that ultimately appropriates Arab and Muslim womanhood for the sake of argumentative strategy. For Arab American feminists concerned with gender and social justice for Arab and Muslim women worldwide, this common discursive framework does violence to the very women it purports to represent. It attempts to provide an analysis isolated from the very conditions (for example, military occupation and global economic restructuring) that help give rise to the violences they face, while simultaneously objectifying them as convenient talking points.

The Politics of Invisibility

Given the way Arab women become objectified in popular discourse, it is no wonder that Arab and Arab American feminists often find themselves cast into a liminal space, compelled to engage in a debate constructed by a set of false binaries about whether veiling is oppressive or liberating, for example, or whether feminism is a "Western" concept. These kinds of debates consistently privilege the notion that gender oppression can be understood in isolation from other actors of

oppression, and they routinely center an analysis of the individual as abstracted from larger structural axes of oppression. In short, they enact what I am describing as a politics of invisibility, where the politics of invisibility describes the systematic elision of a nuanced analysis regarding gender justice for Arab women and an overemphasis on sensationalist issues and stereotypical categories associated with Arab womanhood. The politics of invisibility, then, is the complicated process by which Arab and Arab American women are doubly silenced by the very categories that claim to give them voice. Invisibility here is meant to signify both the ways that Arab and Muslim women are silenced and the ways they are made hypervisible, paradoxically, as markers of invisibility, exoticism, or oppression. Far from being absent from the public domain, Arab and Muslim women are represented prolifically as veiled women, as harem slaves (particularly in the 1970s in the context of the 1973 oil embargo), and as exotic belly dancers (in contexts as varied as the popular sitcom *I Dream of Jeannie* to a 2002 Camel cigarette advertising scheme titled "Exotic Pleasures").¹⁷ However, these popular representations of Arab and Muslim womanhood serve to circumscribe them within a totalizing shroud of silence and oppression (recent images of the veil are only the most obvious examples). They speak for Arab women's realities in the shorthand of stereotypical categories. Furthermore, these categories of representation are insidious in that they present themselves as accurate and authentic reflections of Arab women's realities, and they are deployed by the dominant discourse in the same way—as proof of the condition of Arab womanhood.

Because these images are so pervasive, Arab American feminist thought is often overlooked or not heard unless it engages the dominant myths and categories through which Arab womanhood has been filtered in the United States. The continuous need to identify and deconstruct stereotypical images of Arab womanhood functions as a double silencing of Arab American feminists whose energy could be better spent theorizing new spaces of possibility for Arab American women rather than responding to the misinformation promulgated by the dominant discourse. To the extent that Arab and Arab American women, and particularly Arab and Arab American feminists, have been able to carve a space in which to give voice to their own issues and concerns, they have found much of that space reluctantly, yet inevitably, filled with corrective responses to mainstream misunderstandings.

Even those Arab and Arab American narratives that refuse to engage stereotypical categories are often reinterpreted or translated through them. Amal Amireh gives a salient example of this phenomenon in the case of Nawal el Saadawi, a famous Egyptian feminist, whose book *Al-wajh al-'ari lil mara'a al-arabiyyah*

(The naked face of the Arab woman) was translated into English with the title *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, literally covering the Arab woman's face in the process of translation.¹⁸ Though hardly the only example of the way Arab womanhood gets translated through stereotypical categories,¹⁹ this one demonstrates both the power of the metaphorical cover that everywhere threatens to obscure the textured realities of Arab and Muslim women's lives and the politics of reception that privilege the "cover" to the extent of eliding women's subjectivity.

The complicated ways in which the politics of invisibility impact the articulation of Arab American feminism was brought home to me during my own experience at the 2001 NWSA conference. Though I was giving a paper about Arab American literature, I was scheduled on a panel titled "Construction of Gender and Sexuality in International Literature," thereby highlighting popular U.S. perceptions of the Arab as perpetually foreign, even (especially?) in the case of Arab Americans. The conference organizers did not seem to have a framework for understanding Arabs as Americans. Yet it was the audience response to my paper that gave the clearest indication of how Arab American feminism is affected by the politics of invisibility. Remember that I was scheduled on a panel that was meant to discuss international literature, so the U.S. nationality of the writers was subsumed under the organizers' understanding of a dichotomy between domestic-U.S. and foreign-Arab, eliding the possibility of a transnational framework, reinscribing Arabs as foreign within a U.S. context, and pointing to another way in which Arab American women writers did not fit dominant conceptual categories. Moreover, the women in the audience seemed to have no frame of reference for understanding Arab or Arab American women as writers, since the activity of writing requires a subjectivity that is incompatible with the stereotypical frames of reference that are widely available for understanding Arab and Muslim womanhood. Indeed, these dominant interpretive categories were clearly in play for the woman who posed one of the main questions I received, though it must be said that the overwhelming audience response to my paper was characterized by silence, despite the fact that there was ample time left in the session for discussion. It struck me as telling, then, that one of the main questions I did receive was from a white woman who wanted me to explain why Arab and Arab American women react negatively when she tells them she is a belly dancer. Her indignant tone suggested that she was asking for validation and reassurance about her performance of the belly dance as a white woman. Her question can be contextualized within a larger phenomenon of the rising popularity of American interpretations of belly dance and the increasing popularity of belly-dance exercise classes. These are further embedded in a larger history of the

American belly-dance community, which has seen itself as reclaiming and honoring the belly dance as a celebration of female power since at least the 1970s and has, in some instances, presented itself as saving the dance from its excessively patriarchal cultural heritage.²⁰ I can only assume that my questioner was coming from the righteous perspective of such good intentions when she inappropriately, and rather shockingly, expected me to speak for other Arab and Arab American women's reactions to her. More to my point, however, her question exemplified the fact that the only way in which Arab womanhood can be understood is in terms of the already entrenched stereotypical markers of Arab female sexuality, particularly because I made no mention of belly dancing in my talk.

Regardless of which stereotypical category was invoked during my presentation, the fact remains that the audience had either no frame of reference for understanding Arab womanhood (in the case of Arab American women writers, for example) or could understand Arab women only through the filter of preexisting stereotypical categories (like the harem, the veil, and the belly dancer). The implications of this sort of politics of invisibility are explored by Japanese American writer Mitsuye Yamada in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*: "No matter what we say or do, the stereotype still hangs on. I am weary of starting from scratch each time I speak or write, as if there were no history behind us, of hearing that among the women of color, Asian women are the least political, or the least oppressed, or the most polite." I reference Yamada here because of the way in which she writes about the "double invisibility" of Asian American women.²¹ As I elaborate on what I mean by the politics of invisibility in relation to Arab American women, Yamada provides a useful model for analyzing the insidiousness of a stereotype that reinforces the image of Asian American, or for my purposes Arab American, women as already inscribed in a space of silence or oppression. Like Yamada, I felt as if I were "starting from scratch" in that I had to name the stereotypes of Arab women as stereotypes before I could begin the work of dispelling them. In this regard, then, the politics of invisibility has impacted Arab American women's lives and, by extension, the articulation of Arab American feminism in insidious and complicated ways.

It is not simply that Arab American women are not seen because they are, as contemporary U.S. popular culture would have us believe, "hidden" behind the veil. Rather, as the barista's comment indicates, it is a matter of not being credited with the possibility of existence. Arab feminism appears as an oxymoron not only because Arab women are perceived to be silent and submissive according to the mythology of the veil. It is an oxymoron because Arab women are not afforded the subjectivity of thinking, theorizing individuals. We are not merely silenced; we are

wholly displaced and, therefore, ontologically elided, by sensationalized news stories and images of oppressed and exoticized Arab women. Arab and Arab American women as actively engaged in the process of creating and producing knowledge is incomprehensible to those individuals who understand Arab and Arab American women through the filmy lens of stereotypical categories. My own experience at the 2001 NWSA conference speaks to the ways in which Arab American feminism has gone unrecognized and unacknowledged within the mainstream movement. With no frame of reference by which to understand it, it has all too often either been ignored or been displaced by the very stereotypes it seeks to critique.

The Cutting Edge of Invisibility

Three months after the 2001 NWSA conference, following the events of September 11, the politics of invisibility would take on another dimension in relation to Arab American feminisms in the academy. The explosion of stories and images of Afghan women's brutal oppression at the hands of the Taliban (an issue that had utterly failed to garner public and widespread U.S. interest for years) in many ways highlighted the hypervisibility of Muslim (often conflated with Arab) womanhood. Again, it was not a matter of not being seen. Indeed, the U.S. public seemed to believe that it was finally seeing Muslim and Arab women in a way that it had not seen them previously. However, the seemingly sudden hypervisibility of Muslim and Arab women's lives had, predictably, shrouded their realities even further. The sheer proliferation of the image of the veil, coupled with the way in which it was reproduced as a monolithic signifier of the oppression of Muslim and Arab women, effectively displaced any potential for understanding the complicated network of power relations, patriarchal and imperial, that impact women's lives in Middle Eastern and Muslim countries.

In September 2001, I was teaching a course at Emory University titled "American Identities," and as I struggled to acknowledge and voice the disturbing reality of violence and racism enacted against the Arab American community as a corrective to my students' assured assertions that hostility and hate crimes did not exist, I realized something about the mechanics of invisibility. Despite evidence and news stories to the contrary, my students could not see the violent and dangerous reality of Arab Americans' lives after 9/11, in part, because their understanding of the Arab American community was already determined by the dominant narrative of terrorism. As with the mythology of the veil, the narrative of terrorism had prefigured my students' understanding of Arab Americans. Their knowledge about Arab Americans was informed by the prolific image of the terrorist, which was incompatible with the realities of hate crimes and victimization

that I wanted them to acknowledge. The conditions of Arab Americans' lives were already displaced by the interpretive categories through which they had come to be understood.

Regrettably, my colleagues' responses to me and to my work after September 11 also highlighted the problematic ways in which Arab American women's realities continued to be elided. The immediate connection that my peers made to my work on representations of Arab womanhood in U.S. popular culture after the horrific events of September 11 was to suggest, with a tinge of jealousy, that my work was at least now "cutting edge." I did not, and still do not, know how to respond to heartbreaking destruction and grief with the consideration of how I might capitalize on or benefit from that destruction and grief. Yet the "cutting edge" comment once again exemplifies the way in which the hypervisibility of Arab womanhood actually worked to further eclipse Arab and Arab American women's realities. The assumption that my work was now suddenly interesting or useful in a way that it had not previously been participates in the construction of 9/11 as the origin story for perceptions and representations of Arab women, and, in so doing, ignores the history of representations of Arab womanhood in the United States. It also suggests that an understanding of Arab womanhood is important only in relation to larger political and international conflict and achieves a moment of recognition in the shadow of such events.

Perhaps most problematic, however, is the suggestion that I can capitalize, through my research, on the increased attention given to representations of Arab women since it condones and reinforces an uncritical commodification of such representations. Even if unwittingly, it advocates for the appropriation of representations of Arab womanhood at the expense of examining the complex realities that characterize Arab women's lives. In fact, my colleagues' comments failed to acknowledge a much more problematic and insidious academic climate for scholars writing about issues related to the Middle East, particularly since 2001. As Beshara Doumani argues, "The academy is in the midst of a transformation driven by the increasing commercialization of knowledge . . . buffeted between conflicting but intimately related forces of anti-liberal coercion and neoliberal privatization." In other words, to the extent that scholarship about Arab and Muslim womanhood can be commodified and marketed (and the celebrity status of Orientalist native informants like Azar Nafisi and Ayaan Hirsi Ali are good examples of this process), such commercialization goes hand in hand with both overt and covert forms of censorship. In a climate in which the David Horowitz Freedom Center deploys the language of "academic freedom" to chastise women's studies departments for their lack of attention to "the plight of Muslim women"

and to coerce those departments into promulgating Islamophobic and simplistic lessons about women and Islam, the conversation about Arab and Muslim womanhood once again gets reduced to an obfuscating binary.²² In such a context, in which surveillance and privatization work in tandem, Arab American feminisms seem to be presented with two options: be appropriated or be censored and censored.

NWSA Revisited

One of the most troubling features of the politics of invisibility is precisely this ability to simultaneously silence Arab American feminist analysis and produce discourse that further obscures that analysis. As I see it, the primary task for Arab American feminisms is to find a way to reject both disingenuous appropriation as well as more insidious forms of censure. My suggestion for responding to the politics of invisibility actually brings me back to my discussion of the "Women in Islam" panel at the 1980 NWSA conference and to a recognition of the ways that Arab American feminist discourse has long been engaged in mobilizing, or deploying, the politics of invisibility as a strategy. In the context of a hegemonic white women's movement, the panelists addressing Arab women's issues at the 1980 NWSA conference spent much of their time working to dispel mainstream U.S. feminist narratives that cast Middle Eastern women as unwilling victims of a seemingly hyperpatriarchal society. In so doing, they were employing a critical perspective that participated in a mode of analysis that paralleled the experience of women of color at the 1981 NWSA conference, as documented by Chela Sandoval in her article "Feminism and Racism: A Report on the 1981 National Women's Studies Association Conference."²³ Sandoval's account of the way in which women of color organized in response to the title of the 1981 NWSA conference, "Women Respond to Racism," offers a useful framework for understanding the work that has already been done by Arab American feminists. Although Arab American feminists were not clearly identified with what Sandoval calls "U.S. Third World feminists" in the context of the early 1980s feminist movement, both groups of women were clearly utilizing some of the same strategies.

In many ways, the fact that Arab American feminism has had to construct itself negatively has facilitated the development of its greatest strength: an oppositional consciousness. Sandoval's comments regarding the experiences of feminists of color at the 1981 conference can apply to Arab American feminists as well: "U.S. Third World feminists must recognize that our learned sensitivity to the mobile webs of power is a skill that, once developed, can become a sophisticated form of oppositional consciousness . . . which creates the opportunity

for flexible, dynamic and tactical responses." This sort of flexible, dynamic, and tactical response to power is what Ahmed witnessed at the "Women in Islam" panel in 1980, and it is the type of critical consciousness and resistance that Arab American feminists have continued to cultivate in response to multiple forms of oppression propagated by racism in the white feminist movement, sexism in Arab and Arab American communities, and the racist, sexist, and patronizing effects of imperialistic projects of so-called liberation. What Arab American feminists need most urgently is to continue to use the skills and tools we have gained from an oppositional consciousness in order to forge more spaces of possibility for the lives of Arab and Arab American women. The work of Arab American feminists contributes to the work of those feminists, both in the United States and transnationally, who "are calling for new subjectivity, a political revision that denies any one perspective as the only answer, but instead posits a shifting tactical and strategic subjectivity that has the capacity to re-center depending upon the forms of oppression to be confronted."²⁴ Indeed, Arab American feminists demonstrate a "shifting . . . strategic subjectivity" by creatively mobilizing a politics of invisibility. Mobilizing the politics of invisibility can mean using silence as a strategy; it is a response that understands contextual clues to determine when speech will simply reinforce the false binary that frames so much of the public discourse about Arab and Muslim womanhood. It employs oppositional consciousness in flexible ways, and therefore does not solely operate as a counterdiscourse, since counternarratives run the risk of legitimating the problematic assumptions of the very discourses they resist. Most important, mobilizing the politics of invisibility helps to disarm the notion that silence and invisibility are necessarily oppressive and opens up a wider field of intervention for Arab American feminists.

The powerful and potent shorthand of cultural mythologies (like the images of the belly dancer and the terrorist, for example) and of sensationalist stories about the "plight" of Arab and Muslim women is not going to disappear—these tropes are unfortunately too useful as interpretive categories. Simply advocating for a rejection of current stereotypical categories and narratives would inevitably lead to the establishment of equally limiting categories of representation, and spending energy to create a counterdiscourse will perhaps unwittingly reify the false binary that already frames much of public understanding. The work of Arab American feminists, then, must continue to encourage a fruitful fluidity that constantly forges new possibilities for understanding and contextualizing the complex realities of Arab and Arab American women's lives. In solidarity with social justice and liberation projects worldwide, we must mindfully utilize the tools of

an oppositional consciousness in order to support the urgent work of carving and crafting new spaces for the expression of Arab American feminisms. Rather than simply resisting the politics of invisibility that have denied us a full presence, we must mobilize it, thereby reinventing and transforming that invisibility into a tool with which we will continue to illustrate the brilliant complexities of Arab and Arab American women's lives.

Humanitarian Situation" (un.org/News/briefings/docs/2009/090120_Gaza); Amnesty International, *The Conflict in Gaza: A Briefing on Applicable Law, Investigation, and Accountability* (London: Amnesty International, 2009); and International Committee of the Red Cross, "Gaza: Emergency Aid Alone Is Not Enough" (<http://icrc.org/web.eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/Palestine-update-220109?opendocument>), as a few examples.

25. See, for example, Fida Qishta and Peter Beaumont, "Israel Accused of War Crimes over Assault on Gaza Village," *Observer*, Jan. 18, 2009; and Al-Haq, "Re: Gross Human Rights Violations and War Crimes in the Gaza Strip," Jan. 7, 2009 (<http://alhaq.or/etemplate.php?id=140>).

26. Gould, 3; *Congressional Record*, "Support for Israel in Its Battle with Hamas and the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process," S.R. 10, Jan. 8, 2009; *Congressional Record*, "Recognizing Israel's Right to Defend Itself Against Attacks from Gaza," H.R. 34, Jan. 9, 2009.

27. See Naomi Klein, "On Rescuing Private Lynch and Forgetting Rachel Corrie," *Guardian*, May 22, 2003. Tom Hurndall and James Miller (United Kingdom) were killed by the IDF, and Brian Avery (United States) was severely wounded in the weeks following Rachel's death.

28. For more details on this case, see Tom Wright and Therese Saliba, "Rachel Corrie's Case for Justice," Counterpunch.org, Mar. 15–16, 2008 (<http://counterpunch.org/wright03152008/html>).

29. For information on the Olympia-Rafah Sister City Project, see <http://orscp.org>.

30. Fida Qishta, personal conversation, Apr. 20, 2006.

31. "Israeli Attacks Kill over 310 in Gaza in One of Israel's Bloodiest Attacks on Palestinians since 1948," *Democracy Now!* Dec. 29, 2008 (http://www.democracynow.org/2008/12/29/israeli_attacks_kill_over_310_in).

32. *Washington Post*, Mar. 16, 2004.

33. See <http://rachelswords.org>.

34. Philip Weiss, "Why These Tickets Are Too Hot for New York," *Nation*, Apr. 3, 2006, 14, 13.

35. Wright and Saliba, "Rachel Corrie's Case for Justice"; Corrie, *Let Me Stand Alone*, 290;

36. Said, "Meaning of Rachel Corrie," xxii; Nada Elia, "The 'White' Sheep of the Family: But Bleaching Is Like Starvation," in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), 230; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2003), 124.

37. See Eleanor Adbella Doumato, *Women and Globalization in the Arab Middle East: Gender, Economy, and Society* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2003).

38. See Hammad's Web site: <http://subeirhammad.org>.

39. Suheir Hammad, "On the Brink of . . .," in *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway . . . and More*, ed. Danny Simmons (New York: Atria Books, 2004), 197.

40. Gila Svirsky, "Feminist Peace Activism During the al-Aqsa Intifada," in *Women and the Politics of Military Confrontation: Palestinian and Israeli Gendered Narratives of Dislocation*, ed. Nahla Abdo and Ronit Lentin (New York: Bergham Books, 2002), 244; Corrie, "Rachel's War."

41. See Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*; and Tom Wright and Therese Saliba, *Checkpoint: The Palestinians after Oslo* (Arab Film Distribution, 1997).

19. Dissidents, Displacements, and Diasporas: An Interview with Dena Al-Adeeb

1. Before the emergence of the state of Iraq, citizens of Iraq had either an Ottoman *taba'iyya* (affiliation) or Iranian *taba'iyya*. Some Iraqis chose the Iranian *taba'iyya* even though they were not

of Iranian descent because it could lead to avoiding the Ottoman draft. Some members of my family adopted the Iranian *taba'iyya* to avoid the Ottoman draft, and some were actually of Iranian descent. Saddam Hussein's deportation campaigns were an attempt to ethnically cleanse Iraq of Iraqis of Iranian descent (especially those persons in opposition, ruling elites, and any who had economic wealth and power).

2. The Mukhabarat are the Iraqi secret police that operated in countries around the world as well as in Iraq.

3. Karbala is a city in Iraq, situated approximately fifty-five miles southwest of Baghdad, on the western bank of the Euphrates and at the right side of Husainiya Creek. It witnessed the bloody battle that took place in AD 680 between the army of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid Bin Mu'awiya and Imam Husayn—the son of Ali and the grandson of Prophet Mohammed—and his followers, who were on route to claim leadership over Kufa. This battle resulted in the brutal massacre of all male members of *ahl-al-bayt*—the house of the Prophet—while women were taken as *sabaya* (captives). The city has become a sacred place of pilgrimage—both physical and spiritual—for the redemption of suffering by Shiite Muslims.

4. The 'Ashura rituals commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Husayn by Shiites take place every year on the tenth of Muharram of the Muslim Hijri Lunar month and last for forty days. The ritual commemoration may involve the physical or spiritual pilgrimage of Shiites to Karbala, where the battle of Karbala took place in AD 680. The massacre of Husayn and his seventy-two followers in Karbala is the central point of the Shia narrative.

20. Arab American Feminisms: Mobilizing the Politics of Invisibility

1. miriam cooke and Margot Badran, *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1990).

2. Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 783–90; Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood, "Feminism, the Taliban, and the Politics of Counter-Insurgency," *Anthropological Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (2002): 339–54.

3. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1992).

4. Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

5. Nilufer Gole, *The Forbidden Modern* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1996); Qasim Amin, "The Liberation of Women," "The New Woman": *Two Documents in the History of Egyptian Feminism*, trans. Samiha Peterson (Cairo: American Univ. in Cairo Press, 1992); Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women*; Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007).

6. For exceptions, see Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006); Homa Hoodfar, "The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: Veiling Practices and Muslim Women," in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital, ed. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1997), 248–79; Fadwa el Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy, Resistance* (Oxford: Berg, 1999); and Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005).

7. Mino Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and Patriarchy in Iran* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2005), 2.

8. Alisa Bierria, Mayaba Liebenthal, and Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, "To Render Ourselves Visible: Women of Color Organizing and Hurricane Katrina," in *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation*, ed. South End Press Collective (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2007), 32.

9. Phyllis Chesler, *The Death of Feminism: What's Next in the Struggle for Women's Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

10. Christina Hoff Sommers, "The Subjection of Islamic Women," *Weekly Standard*, May 21, 2007.

11. For further critique of these "native testimonials," see Saba Mahmood, "Feminism, Democracy, and Empire: Islam and the War of Terror," in *Women's Studies on the Edge*, ed. Joan Wallach Scott (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008), 81–114.

12. Leila Ahmed, "Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem," *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 3 (1982): 521, 522.

13. David Horowitz, "Islamofascism Awareness Week," *Front Page*, Sept. 21, 2007 (<http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles>).

14. Robert Spencer, "Islamic Misogyny," *Front Page*, Jan. 4, 2008 (<http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles>); Horowitz, "Islamofascism Awareness Week."

15. David Horowitz, "A Response to Feminists on the Violent Oppression of Women in Islam," *Front Page*, Jan. 24, 2008 (<http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles>).

16. Katha Pollitt, "Sign the Open Letter from American Feminists," *Blog: And Another Thing* (<http://www.thenation.com/blogs/anotherthing?pid=273005>).

17. Amira Jarmakani, *Imagining Arab Womanhood: The Cultural Mythology of Veils, harems, and Belly Dancers in the U.S.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

18. Amal Amireh, "Framing Nawal el Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26, no. 1 (2000): 224.

19. See also Susan Muaddi Darraj in this volume.

20. Amira Jarmakani, "Belly Dancing for Liberation," in *Arabs in the Americas: Interdisciplinary Essays on the Arab Diaspora*, ed. Darcy Zabel (New York: Peter Lang Press, 2006), 145–68.

21. Mitsuye Yamada, "Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1981), 71; Mitsuye Yamada, "Invisibility Is an Unnatural Disaster: Reflections of an Asian American Woman," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1981), 37.

22. Beshara Doumani, "Between Coercion and Privatization," in *Academic Freedom after September 11* (New York: Zone Books, 2006), 11; Horowitz, "Islamofascism Awareness Week."

23. Chela Sandoval, "Feminism and Racism: A Report on the 1981 National Women's Studies Association Conference," in *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990), 66.

24. Sandoval, 66, 67.

22. Personal and Political: The Dynamics of Arab American Feminism

1. See, for example, Gloria Steinem, *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem* (New York: Little, Brown, 1993).

2. J. A. Khawaja, "The Queen, Carcasses, and Other Things," in *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, ed. Joanna Kadi (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 1994), 43.

3. Nada Elia, "A Woman's Place Is in the Struggle," in *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, ed. Joanna Kadi (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 1994), 118.

4. Lisa Suhair Majaj, "Boundaries: Arab/American," in *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, ed. Joanna Kadi (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 1994), 77–78.

5. Evelyn Shakir, *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997), 146.

6. Shakir, 146.

7. Mona Fayad, "The Arab Woman and I," in *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, ed. Joanna Kadi (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 1994), 170.

8. Fayad, 171.

9. Geraldine Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), 5–6, 54.

10. Brooks, 52.

11. Shakir, 3.

23. Teaching Scriptural Texts in the Classroom: The Question of Gender

1. Historically, the split in Islam along Sunni-Shi'i lines occurred after the death of Prophet Muhammad in AD 632. The Muslim community differed on the question of succession to Muhammad. As a result, two distinct doctrines developed, the Sunni caliphate and the Shi'i imamate. For Sunnis, the caliph is the elected successor to the Prophet in matters political and military but not religious. In contrast, for the Shi'i, the leadership of the community is vested in the imam, who is divinely ordained and occupies a religio-political post. For more, see John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, expanded ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), 45–47.

2. Such as Farid Esack, *The Qur'an: A Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002); and Asma Barlas, "Believing Women" in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2002).

3. Thomas L. Friedman, "Cukoo in Carolina," *New York Times*, Aug. 28, 2002.

4. For instance, UNC's home Web site refers to the incident under "Summer Reading Controversy."

5. Asma Barlas, "Texts and Textualities: The Qur'an, *Tafsir*, and *Ahadith*," in "Believing Women" in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2002), 50.

6. This topic is a hotly debated issue among scholars of Islam. Regardless of whether the door of *ijtihad* has been actually closed, the consensus of the community established by al-Shafi'i is a block in the way of any serious rereading and challenging the textual interpretations established during the doctrinal development of Islam. Any novel reinterpretation of texts is only possible and only if the opinions of the Muslim scholars and jurists are stripped of the sacredness that is usually accorded to the Quran.

7. John L. Esposito, "Religious Life: Belief and Practice," in *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), 78.